

Vigilant Firehouse
1066 Wisconsin Avenue, N. W.
Washington, D. C.

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

THE VIGILANT FIREHOUSE

Location: 1066 Wisconsin Avenue, N. W., Washington, D. C.

Present Owner: Miss Cathrine O'Donnell

Present Use: Furniture manufacture and sales, McKittrick Inc.

Significance: One of the oldest firehouses standing in the District of Columbia. Started as a private fire company in 1817, the Vigilants built this structure on 10 August 1844 as the second firehouse on the site.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The Vigilant Firehouse is a two story brick building on Wisconsin Avenue in Georgetown, formerly 32nd Street. It is Washington, D. C.'s, oldest example of the traditions that developed from the early private and volunteer fire companies.

The Vigilant Fire Company was formed in 1817, making it the oldest in Georgetown and one of the oldest in the District of Columbia. The company was organized with John Kurz as the president, James Moore as the Secretary and James Corcoran as the Treasurer.¹ The engine was purchased from John Agnue in Philadelphia, Pa., and christened the Vigilant.² The Vigilants are reputed to have been the first fire company to have a steam fire engine, (1868).³ As the city developed the fire companies were reorganized and gradually became a part of the government of the District of Columbia. The Vigilants were reorganized in 1848 and then succeeded by Fire Company No. 1 of Georgetown on April 1st, 1867. This became District of Columbia Fire Company No. 5 in 1871. The building was abandoned to commercial uses when the fire company moved around the corner on November 17th, 1883.

The present building at 1066 Wisconsin Avenue was built in 1844 and occupied on the 10th of August. This building was occupied as a firehouse until 1883, when it became the Palmer Bottling Works and then McKittrick, Inc. Both of these functions made alterations in the firehouse, adding to it and re-arranging the interior spaces. The major additions were made in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. During its days as a firehouse there was only the main block of the building with a small two floor shed roof addition to the rear for the horses and hay.

The first building on the site used by the Vigilants is described as wood frame and was one that was added to also and must have appeared easy to move. In December of 1829 the Mayor of Georgetown was authorized \$20 to move the Vigilant Firehouse to, "...some convenient and suitable site..."⁴ This was not done right away, but in 1832, "\$1,000 was appropriated to aid in the purchase of a hydraulion engine and hose reel, and for the erection of a house and preservation of the same. A new house was not erected, an addition being made to the old one September 9th, 1835, at the cost of \$200."⁵ On the 16th of September in 1843 the firehouse was auctioned off and purchased by George W. Haller who moved it across the street to 1079. This building was replaced by a modern one in 1964.

Throughout the Georgetown Corporation records are the periodic records of repairs and purchase of equipment for the buildings of the Vigilant Fire Company and the later Fire Company No. 1.

There are many references to the Vigilant Fire Company throughout the history and lore of the District of Columbia fire fighters. An inscription on the front of the Vigilant House, for example, relates part of a tale about Bush the fire dog. "Bush was of mixed breed, of dark brown color, a volunteer of Fire Co. No. 1. He ran with the engine to all fires and parades and was a general favorite with all who chanced to form his acquaintance. He became careless about his diet, ate free lunch between meals and was taken suddenly ill July 4, 1869. The doctors pronounced it a hopeless case of arsenical poisoning, and after several severe spasms he passed peacefully in the sixth year of his age."⁶

The days of the Vigilant Fire Company were colorful and its members involved in much practical joke activity. The rivalry between the Companies was keen and occasionally violent. "About the year 1840, some members of the Vigilant and Western Star Companies built a bonfire on the Brick-Yard Hill and sent a messenger to the Union Company in the city to inform them that the business portion of the town was in danger of destruction. The Union in great haste soon arrived on the scene of the fire, and were so disgusted that the language used was neither select nor complementary. In return they received a volley of stones, their engines and lamps were broken and the crowd pursued them across the creek. The following day about forty arrests were made, the whites were fined and the slave received lashes."⁷

In another incident, "The Potomac Hose, with muffled bells and silent tread, would sometimes steal near the Vigilant Engine house, when the ringing of bells and the cry would alarm the Vigilant Company..."⁸

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At an Early meeting of the Georgetown Fire Department, "The proceedings of the meeting were so interesting that two members were fined ten cents each for swearing, and a resolution was passed that any member who mentioned the name of the Vigilant Fire Company should be fined 25 cents..."⁹

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

The Vigilant Firehouse was built sometime after Georgetown's oldest volunteer firefighting brigade was formed in 1817. At the time this report was written in 1964, the brick two story, gable end building with its cupola was in sad repair, being used as a bedding factory. This rectangular structure had been added to on both sides and in the rear and then remodelled during its life as a bottle works. Even in this sad state the building remained the oldest standing firehouse in the District of Columbia in 1964.

The original building was a rectangle with its narrow, gable end to the street. Thirty feet away was the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal and a block away on the Potomac River. This original building had two rooms - one on the first floor and one on the second. A hatch in the ceiling of the second floor led to the cupola. A shed roofed two floor addition was made to the rear of the firehouse first, the second floor, shows signs of having been used for hay storage. There were later additions to the south and the north sides of the firehouse. The addition to the south is a small one floor area running the depth of the firehouse and the first addition to the rear. The addition to the north is a large two floor area, also running the length of the entire firehouse and rear addition. The most recent addition to the fire house, and obviously done from its commercial days is to the extreme rear of the building and attached to the rear of the first Rear addition. The roofs of all of the additions are gently sloped shed roofs. There are parapets on the front of the north and the south addition facades.

The front or east of the firehouse shows easily the three various units -- the main or center portion and the two flanking additions. The main portion of the building had two doors, large enough for fire equipment on the first floor. On the second floor there are three rectangular six over six light double hung windows which had blinds. The gable end of the building has a brick cornice at the roof line. Centered at the front of the building the cupola was built of wood. This is set on a low platform and is square. The concave curved roof is held up by brackets and surmounted by a ball. The roof of the cupola is metal while the remaining roofs are shingle or roll roofing. Set into the brick on the front gable is a stone with "Vigilant, Instituted, 1817" inscribed on it. Directly below this and also centered in the end of the gable is a wrought iron "V", which undoubtedly was put on as a trademark for the Vigilantes, but also seems to serve as a tension rod tie, since it is matched by an "S" curve on the back of the main building. Set into the brick on the front of the building several feet above the street level and between the doors is another stone, this one is inscribed, "Bush, the Old Fire Dg, Died of Poison, July 5th 1869, R.I.P."

The addition to the south of the main building is one floor high, also of brick with a decorative brick cornice. This area contains a pair of flanking two over two light double hung windows. This dates from commercial days.

The commercial addition to the north is two stories high and about the same width as the main building. This has a show window and door that are not original. The second floor, however is in tact. This has three brick-arched windows across the front. Above this is a decorative brick cornice on the parapet. These windows are six over six light wooden double hung windows.

The interior of the first floor is completely stripped of any original trim or finish. The second floor has plaster and there is wooden trim around the windows. This trim is made up of flat rectangular pieces and is rather simple. There is no sign of any original mechanical equipment or hardware. The 1964 stairway was wide and not original.

The over-all size of the Vigilant Firehouse is 24 by 44 for the original structure and 56 by 81 including all of the additions.

There is no basement in the structure. The first floor is concrete and the second floor is wood. The original fire equipment doors are missing.

On the interior of the structure there are some "turn of the century" partitions, which are partially glass. On the first floor there are some partitions and a bathroom that were added in the 1940's. There also was some steel reinforcement added in the '40's.

FOOTNOTES

1. Cassedy, Albert J. THE FIREMAN'S RECORD. Page 25.
2. Cassedy, Albert J. Page 25.
3. Federal Writers' Project Works Progress Administration.
WASHINGTON, CITY AND CAPITAL. Page 723.
4. Georgetown Corporation Laws and Ordinances. Page 16.
5. Cassedy, Albert J. Page 27.
6. Cassedy, Albert J. Page 21.
7. Cassedy, Albert J. Page 21.
8. Cassedy, Albert J. Page 21.
9. Cassedy, Albert J. Page 25.

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